

Faith on a knife edge

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Last year, the Labour MP Stephen Timms was stabbed by one of his constituents because of his stance on the Iraq war. He talks to Simon Jones about force, faith, and forgiveness.



Face-off: Stephen Timms, MP for East Ham, thought he had good relations with his Muslim constituents until Roshonara Choudhry (below) pulled a knife on him SIMON JONES

SHE had two knives. She had bought them new, to make sure they would be sharp. Worried about her own strength, she thought she would aim for his stomach.

A week after the 2010 election —in which he took advantage of his good standing in his one-third-Muslim constituency to record the largest majority in Parliament — Stephen Timms sat in Beckton Globe, a community centre in Newham, East London. He was dealing with a series of routine enquiries at his weekly surgery.

A young woman had made an appointment to discuss an employment matter. She asked to speak to the MP rather than his assistant, which was not unusual. He was surprised to discover later that she was 21, since she looked younger than that. He rose to greet her, and she lifted her arm as if to shake his hand — unusual in a woman in Muslim dress. But, instead, she moved around the side of the desk, smiled, and plunged a five-inch blade into him. Twice. Shocked, he cried out “What did you do that for?”, but at the same time thought, “That was because of Iraq.”

There are some politicians who take a cautious stance in interviews, and if any MP is entitled to be a little wary in meetings, it is Mr Timms. But, in fact, he is the kind of person who buys you a coffee before the questions start.

Some people have always seen the war on terror, and its fallout in attacks such as the one on Mr Timms, as a conflict between faiths — Islam squaring up to the Christianity shared by George Bush and Tony Blair. But Mr Timms rejects the implication. “I actually think faith is a very good starting point for politics. It’s the source of the values we need to make politics work.” He then corrects himself: “a source”. “Responsibility, patience, solidarity, truthfulness.

Christians and Muslims, and people of other faiths, share these values.” To those who would argue that it breeds unhelpful certainty about the rightness of an action, he says, “The key thing about people of faith is that they believe only God determines what’s right and wrong. That perception is a good one.”

IT WAS faith that first brought Mr Timms to East London. Brought up in a secular home in Hampshire, he followed his brother to a Crusaders group. Active in the Christian Union at university, he went on a summer mission to Forest Gate, in Newham, close to his current constituency.

“It was the first time I’d been to east London, or anywhere like it. We had a great couple of weeks, sleeping in an attic alongside a railway line. At the end of that fortnight, I could see for the first time how what I believed could shape my life. We went back a couple of times, and then, when I finished college and got a job in London, I moved there. “Almost immediately, I joined the local Labour Party. I hadn’t been involved in any student politics, and I grew up in a church that believed that to be a decent person was to be a Conservative, but it always struck me as puzzling that people who believed the same thing that I believed would vote for them. That was a mystery to me. I suppose what I’ve been trying to do, ever since, is show them that they were mistaken.”

IN NEWHAM, Mr Timms initially feared that his Christianity might hinder his political ambition. The constituency was already a diverse one, and Christian-Muslim relations were important from the start. But being open about his faith had proved beneficial. “The first person to urge me to stand for the candidacy was the chair of the Alliance of Newham Muslim Associations. The point he put to me was: ‘We believe in God, you believe in God, we think you should go for this job.’ So being a Christian was more helpful than I’d expected, and continues to be.

“People in Newham still meet in large numbers in a way that hasn’t been common in the rest of the country since the 1950s. I go to meetings of the Indian Muslim Association, the Kerala Catholic Association, a number of churches, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and Sikh gatherings, and I enjoy relating to people at those kinds of events. It helps build political support.”

Inevitably, despite the lofty ambition with which any party wins an election, governing involves as much responding to events as it does the implementation of new programmes. When the situation in Kosovo deteriorated, Mr Timms found himself called on to vote for the first time on sending British soldiers into battle. “For me, the question was: ‘Would this action lead to greater justice?’ Then, when it came to Afghanistan, it was clear that the situation had allowed groups to plot terror in the West, and so it seemed to me it was right to intervene to stop it.”

Each decision on military intervention was successively more difficult, until “the hardest decision I’ve had to make as an MP” on Iraq. Before making it, Mr Timms talked to a delegation of Muslims from his constituency. “There was a lot of anger,” he says (he uses this phrase several times). But he voted yes. Saddam Hussein was refusing to allow the weapons inspectors proper access, and was in breach of UN resolutions. The intelligence suggested that he had weapons of mass destruction. It seemed like the sound thing to do.

He does not believe that anyone was trying to persuade him of something they did not believe themselves. He does not think anyone in the British Government lied. But the hesitancy with which he talks about the subject makes it pretty clear that he wishes he had voted the other way.

Not trusting my own reading of his body language, I ask him to clarify later. “I do regret that we undertook military action on grounds which proved subsequently to be wrong.”

OSHONARA CHOUDHRY, his 21-year-old assailant, had been a prizewinning student heading for a first in English and Communications. She volunteered at an Islamic school, helping pupils overcome educational disadvantages. She wanted to become a teacher.



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As a teenager on a school trip, she had been embarrassed when a fellow pupil berated Mr Timms for his support of the war in Iraq. Seven years later, having studied the lectures of the radical Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, she decided first to leave her college (citing an award it gave to the Israeli politician Shimon Peres), and then to become a martyr. She chose her MP, Mr Timms, as a victim after an online search of his voting record. He had “voted strongly for everything as though he had no mercy”, she told police.

On the way to the community centre, she had called in at the bank. She had removed all the money she had earned from tutoring and academic prizes. By the end of the day, she assumed she would be either dead or in jail; so she paid off her student loan in order that the debt did not fall on her parents. She was ready. “I just felt like if he could treat the Iraqi people so mercilessly, then why should I show him any mercy?” she said later when questioned.

In the 2005 election, Mr Timms had faced a candidate for the Respect Party who was ready to take advantage of any anti-war feeling. There were demonstrations in the constituency, and placards of Mr Timms’s face covered in blood. There was a great deal of anger. None the less, he insists that there was never any breakdown in relationship with the various Muslim communities in Newham. And he did not feel any personal security risk — even after the 7/7 bomb attacks.

He had no bodyguard, and took no extra precautions. “I wouldn’t say it never occurred to me, but I certainly can’t recall any incident where I felt I could be at risk.” When I ask him whether that applies for the rest of us, he pauses — For a long time. “I don’t know,” he says. HE WAS fortunate, in the end, that Miss Choudhry chose that particular venue for her attack. Beckton Globe had a security guard who was able to restrain her, and a first-aider who helped to stop the blood pouring from what was a life-threatening wound. “I remember [the first-aider] joking that until recently she’d worked in Newham’s parks. She’d moved to the Globe for a quiet life.”

That sounds remarkably calm. “I remember feeling resigned. I didn’t know what my prospects were, but I knew that the situation was now out of my hands. My fate was not going to be decided by me.”

I wonder if he prayed as he was airlifted to hospital, but all he says is: “I was content to leave the situation with God, I guess.” Not an unsympathetic man, he sounds oddly distanced from his own plight — but it would take a hard mind not to forgive him for that.

The Evening Standard also had forgiveness in mind when splashing the headline “I’m not ready to forgive my knife attacker” on an interview he had given the paper after Miss Choudhry’s court appearance. She was sentenced to life in prison for attempted murder.

The judge made an issue of the faith of both victim and attacker. "I understand that [Mr Timms] brings to bear his own faith, which upholds very different values from those which appear to have driven this defendant.

"Those values are those upon which the common law of this country was founded, and include respect and love for one's neighbour, for the foreigner in the land, and for those who consider themselves enemies, all as part of one's love of God." But for Mr Timms, Labour's vice-chair for faith groups, those values are shared by both Christians and Muslims, just not by extremists of either faith. And the Standard headline was flatly inaccurate.

HIS actual words were "I don't think, at the moment, forgiveness is really an issue." I ask him what he meant. "Whether or not I forgive her is an academic question. It doesn't apply. I have no relationship with Roshonara Choudhry. There has to be some kind of contact before the issue of forgiveness can be raised, else what does forgiveness really mean?

"I don't harbour any grievance. I'm not embittered or angry. Maybe one day there might be the possibility of contact, but, for now, it doesn't arise. It certainly would arise if my attacker was to seek my forgiveness, but there seems very little likelihood of her doing so." I believe him, but I wonder whether it can be right that we do not need to forgive those with whom we have no contact. What of, say, the Christian peace-campaigners who find that there is a lot of anger towards Tony Blair — or those who voted with him — over the war in Iraq? A poor equivalence, for sure, but a question that is worth asking.

"I would say that they should keep campaigning for the things they believe in. I don't think that anger is something that Christians are not allowed to feel. It might be wrong to be in a position where any personal vindictiveness is maintained, but they should continue to make their case. They should feel free to be angry."

He does not say it, but one might easily conclude: what we do with our anger we must be responsible for, but the people who were angry about the war were right.

On hearing that he had been stabbed, MPs from all parties sent their best wishes. A representative of the Liberal Democrats said: "Stephen is one of politics' thoroughly nice guys; a real gentleman." The Muslim Council of Britain noted that "Stephen is a well-known and trusted MP within his very diverse constituency, including many Muslims, who feel deeply hurt by this incident, and he remains in our prayers."

Did he feel that his relationship with that community would be affected, after he had worked so hard to win its support in the election? "I remember waking up in the hospital being surrounded by cards. Many of them were from Muslims, all praying for my speedy recovery. I hadn't, until then, felt like I'd been on the receiving end of Muslim prayer. I can tell you, it felt very encouraging."

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